



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2017

**Editorial zu : (Northern European) Words of the Year and the
Re-affirmation of Scholarly Rigour**

Rohrbach, Lena

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-141976>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Rohrbach, Lena (2017). Editorial zu : (Northern European) Words of the Year and the Re-affirmation of Scholarly Rigour. *Nordeuropaforum*:10-12.

Editorial

(Northern European) Words of the Year and the Re-affirmation of Scholarly Rigour

Lena Rohrbach (Berlin)

It is an annual ritual: not only has the time come for a new editorial but traditionally, around the turn of the year, various countries also select their ›words of the year‹. These selections crystallise and establish the dominant contemporary discourses and key concepts in equal measure. The year 2016 marked the rise of post-truth to unarguable pre-eminence, as confirmed and enacted by nothing so much as the choice of *post-truth* as word of the year in November 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries. This was echoed when the Association for German Language elevated *postfaktisch* (›post-factual‹) to word of the year in December 2016.

Although post-truth was not placed on the winner's podium verbatim by any Northern European country, a panoramic survey of the 2016 shortlists and words of the year in the Nordic countries does open up adjacent semantic fields and discourses. The final winner in Sweden, selected from a shortlist of 43 words in a survey conducted by the journal *Språktidningen* and the Swedish Language Council, was *filterbubbla* (›filter bubble‹). Coined in 2011 by Eli Pariser, the US Internet activist, the term refers to the results of Internet searches filtered as a consequence of personal search preferences, which present individual users with their own personalised selection of information conforming to their own expectations and values.

Iceland's word of the year poll, conducted by the national broadcaster *Ríkisútvarpið* and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, included two pairs of candidates – *hú* and *víkingaklapp* (the chant and Viking clap of Icelandic football fans at Euro 2016), and *Panamaskjöl* (›Panama papers‹) and *aflandsfélag* (›offshore firm‹) – which resonated with two events which powerfully influenced domestic and foreign perceptions of Iceland in the year 2016. The clear victor, however, with a 35 per cent share of the vote was the compound *hrútskýring*, formed from the terms *hrútur* (›ram‹) and *útskýring* (›explanation‹) and introduced into Icelandic in 2011 by the author Hallgrímur Helgason as a translation of *mansplaining*, Rebecca Solnit's original coinage. *Mansplaining* denotes the patronising way in which a (male) person talks to another (female) person about a topic on which the speaker is not fully informed but mistakenly assumes he knows more about than his counterpart. Even more

pointedly than the original portmanteau, the Icelandic neologism underlines that a ram is behaving like a self-appointed shepherd here, irrespective of facts or competences.

Norway's word of the year, chosen by the Language Council of Norway, was *hverdagsintegrering* (»everyday integration«), a term which, from the moment it occurred in Prime Minister Erna Solberg's 2016 New Year's speech, acted as a mantra in the Norwegian discourse on the refugee crisis for literally the whole of last year. Nevertheless, even in Norway the post-factual (*postfaktuell*) did not lose out completely, and is ranked third out of the top ten Norwegian neologisms for last year.

Similarly, the Danes only ostensibly voted counter to the international trend: in Denmark a jury decision initiated by *Danmarks Radio* and the Danish Language Council finally, and not uncontroversially, placed Danishness (*danskhed*) ahead of *brexite* and *faktaresistens* (»fact resistance«). The jury's rationale stated that discussion of what it means to be Danish had the greatest influence on the Danish debate in 2016. Denmark's decision leads back full circle to the Oxford Dictionaries' choice. Alongside the winning word, *post-truth*, for a long time the Brits had another strong contender in *hygge*, defined by the dictionary as »a quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture)«. The art of *hygge* is a core element of being Danish,¹ and retreating Danish-style into an atmosphere of cosy well-being is a reaction to the discomfiting challenges of current events: a *filterbubbla* in one's own living room.

Words of the year are barometers of society's atmosphere. Seen in synopsis, the words of the year 2016 express the perception of a period caught in tension between the global and the local, between acute challenges to the progress achieved by education, democracy, and emancipation versus the (supposed) emotional security of belonging. In this context *filterbubbla*, *hrútskýring* and *danskhed*, in their own ways and with different implications, all evoke conditions of post-truth and latch on to the international trend.

Some have confronted the international invocation of the post-truth era across all channels, including the media scientist Bernhard Pörksen – also at the turn of the year – in his article on »*Die postfaktische Universität*« [»The Post-factual University«] in *DIE ZEIT* (No. 52, 30 Feb. 2016). Pörksen identifies the term's ubiquity as a »symptom of discursive self-abandonment by scholarship, which is otherwise responsible for the production of knowledge that is verified but, in principle, inevitably provisional«. In light of this development, he calls for a second order of information disclosure which, in addition to communicating verified facts (*gatekeeping*), overtly and consistently lays work processes and principles open to scrutiny. This task conferred upon journalism and scholarship is what media scientist Hanne Detel calls *gatereporting*. Scholarly practice can and must counteract the feeling of living in a post-truth age by persistently, and perhaps more forcefully than ever before, doing

¹ Cf. the blog article by Bernd Henningsen: »*Hygge – eine dänische Seligkeit*« [»Hygge – a Danish bliss«] <https://nofoblog.hypotheses.org/> (19 Feb. 2017).

Editorial

something that should distinguish good scholarly practice in any event: communicating the discursivity of (scholarly) knowledge in an overt, self-reflective and publicly comprehensible manner.

NORDEUROPA^{forum} defines itself as a scholarly journal in the sense implied by the *gatereporting* advocated above; its rigorous aim is the high-level publication of scholarly cultural analyses relating to Northern Europe. Disclosure of the sources consulted and transparency concerning the approaches chosen are self-evident requirements of any scholarly publication. In the context of NORDEUROPA^{forum}, the high quality of scholarship is safeguarded by conducting double-blind peer reviews. Publication in an open-access format with an accompanying blog allows rapid and open access – in defiance of the *filterbubbla* – to the latest debates in cultural scholarship relevant to the North.

Following the expansion of its circle of publishers and its editorial staff in recent years, NORDEUROPA^{forum} now boasts a team that reflects the current diversity of disciplines engaged in researching Northern European culture. The articles published in 2016 testify that the new disciplinary line-up initiated in 2013 has been embraced. The published essays and reviews of the past year discuss Northern European constellations from the Middle Ages up to the present day and pursue research questions from literary, linguistic and political scholarship. We look forward to seeing these developments continue in the new year with innovative, nuanced and inspiring articles from the field of Northern European Studies!

Berlin, February 2017